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‘Multilingual Mindset’: a New Perspective for Student Transition in Higher Education.

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ABSTRACT

Student Transition into and out of higher education (HE) is a theme where a lot has been written, explored and analysed. The aim of this opinion piece is to suggest a new pragmatic definition of ‘transition’, based on multilingual approaches to teaching and learning. It will also demonstrate some areas of relevance for this type of theory, providing a novel perspective in monoglot cultures. After reviewing some definitions of transition suggested by existing academic literature, the paper calls for the establishment of a ‘multilingual mindset’ in the field of HE. A ‘multilingual mindset’ could inform theoretical debate on transition, addressing the existing strong trends for the encouragement of Internationalisation in higher education. It recognises those challenges with transition which stem from cultural and linguistic difference and emphasises particularly those which are invisible, or difficult to approach, in monoglot cultures. Accounts of current practice within the scope of a ‘multilingual mindset’, along with personal reflections from a Scottish University perspective, are considered. The paper is written in the hope of providing food for thought, encouraging further experimentation and, perhaps, public exploration and enhancement of this culturally important perspective: that is dealing with Student Transition in Higher Education with a ‘multilingual mindset’.

Keywords: Student Transition, Higher Education, Multilingual Approach, Multilingual Mindset

An Alternative Perception of Transition: Transition with a ‘Multilingual Mindset’

In a globalised world, diversity has been transformed into ‘super-diversity’ (Pauwels, 2014). This ‘super-diversity’ is reflected in the student body as well as the teaching staff in Higher Education (HE). All too often, the linguistic diversity created by a culturally diverse staff and student population is ignored, or treated as a problem to be fixed, rather than as a resource for enriching the sector and fostering intercultural understanding, and a vibrant and fair society. Languages are no longer seen as stable, standardised, clear cut, bounded entities, but rather as deterritorialised mobile resources (Meier, 2016). This means that there can be no assumption of ‘common ground’ of a central, value laden, system, particularly in terms of linguistic knowledge, cultural background and life experiences (Liddicoat, Heugh, Curnow, Jowan, & Scarino, 2014). Transitions are under-theorised however, with research tending to rely “on ‘taken-for-granted’ notions” (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 734) and with “no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a transition” (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2009, p. 5).

Transitions in HE terms are viewed as a series of changes that need different types of support, according to the way the changes are conceptualised (Jindal-Snape, 2010; Gale & Parker, 2014). Gale and Parker (2014, p. 738) offer three different operational definitions, or working descriptions, of transition. They see Transition 1 (T1) as an ‘induction’, a linear progression in HE through phases between secondary school and university (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 739); Transition 2 (T2) as ‘development’ of personal and social identity with stages of ‘maturation’ marked as qualitatively distinct, linear and cumulative movements from one career identity to another (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 741-743); and they consider Transition 3 (T3) as a ‘becoming’ approach (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 743) which reflects and affirms marginalised student histories and subjectivities (Hockings, Cooke, & Bowl, 2010). However, none of these working definitions of transition consider linguistic diversity as a resource. Thus, it is time to recognise that people can no longer afford to follow a simple ‘monolingual mindset’ on transition and on diversity (Gogolin, 2011). There is a need for an alternative conception of transition. This is ‘Transition with a multilingual mindset’.

In transition with a ‘multilingual mindset’, issues are met and overcome as students adapt to HE and adopt new learning paradigms, which are essentially linguistic. Student problems with adapting to a new university culture are, in many cases, problems of understanding its language; problems of adopting new knowledge are connected to understanding and using a new language (Cummins, 2000). Transition with a ‘multilingual mindset’ can clearly be seen, on this view, as an ordinary condition offering resources for learning, both in contextual and personal realities. Through this new perspective, students can be seen as multiple, dynamic identities; social practitioners with diverse (linguistic) knowledge in a multilingual and multicultural ecosystem (Meier, 2016).

Transition in HE: a Multilingual Standpoint in Focus

How can one be aware of otherness if the ‘Other’ is barricaded behind their mother tongue, or trapped by perceptions from, and of, their own language? Without nuanced and complex sensitivity to language matters, attempts to be open

to other cultures and mentalities must always be compromised. Making an effective transition becomes highly challenging as transition cannot be described without recourse to explorations of language. Where people fail to recognise it by trying to see it in only one language, they miss the transition. A 'multilingual mindset' as a new paradigm for student transition within HE could address the division between linguistic and social groups, enhancing visibility and ease of transition; essentially allowing everyone to remove their blindfolds. It could facilitate transdisciplinary work between and amongst all the forms and varieties of language; the languages of each discipline, the language of each participant and the hierarchy of relations these express. Consequently, biographies and trajectories can be valued, strengthening social and professional identities (Meier, 2016).

When university students and teachers learn to recognise stereotypes, ideological platitudes and cultural conceptions, they can begin to see how such ideas cloud an individual's ability to see others as unique persons (Holliday, 2011). Sutherland, Edgar and Duncan (2015) suggest the development of a pedagogical approach to language which enhances this intercultural awareness. Byram (2008) suggests that this can realistically be explored in teaching by providing activities where cultural values and behaviours are considered alongside the deconstruction of stereotypes.

Scottish universities offer induction sessions, cross cultural integration sessions, and completion of reflective, culture and language based, journals as pedagogical tools, to promote successful transition. Celebrating linguistic diversity and variety, and rethinking monoglot viewpoints from a multilingual mindset can complete this picture of an effective approach to establishing new identities with high levels of intercultural translatability. Unfortunately, multilingual elements are either missing or limited in the wider curriculum. Jin and Cortazzi (2013) emphasise the particular importance of language, observing that language is the medium for learning, and transition, because teaching and learning always crosses cultural contexts.

Pauwels' (2014) study of university language lecturers in Australia and Great Britain indicates low levels of cultural awareness and limited degrees of engagement with students who speak more than one language. Lack of ability to identify linguistic and cultural diversity of students, as part of any learning and teaching process, is a frequent consequence (Bruen & Kelly, 2016). Academic staff's pedagogical approaches, while they remain monoglot, cannot be effective, or work to enhance transition, in the ways posited by an internationalised curriculum. Yet, Scarino (2014) believes that a monolingual mindset haunts classrooms and university settings.

This opinion piece hopes that the idea of a new theoretical platform for student transition in HE will encourage the debate in examining and fostering a new perspective: Student Transition in Higher Education with a 'multilingual mindset'.

Biography

Argyro Kanaki, Lecturer in Education, University of Dundee, and an experienced language teacher, researches the field of language awareness. Competent in five modern European languages, and qualified as a teacher in four of them, her current teaching focuses on the pedagogy of modern foreign languages, issues around culture, and debates in international education.

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